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SHUKARWARI BEEJ

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Beej is one of the most important rites in the Indian tradition of the Ismailis.The Hindi word *beej* means *crescent*. When the new moon falls on Friday, the Ismailis keep a fast a tradition that came down since the period of Pir Shams, known as *shukarwari beej* (Friday's crescent). Later, Pir Sadr al-Din and Pir Hasan Kabir al-Din elaborated importance of the *beej*.

The tradition has it that the Hindus divided the era before Kalapa into four jugs (periods), such as Karta Jug (17,28,000 years), Treta Jug (12,96,000 years), Duapur Jug (8, 64,000 years) and Kal Jug (4,32,000 years). They followed old custom of fasting prevalent in previous jugs. For example, in Karta Jug, the fast of *ekadashi* (or *agiparas*) was kept on Monday, the 11th day of the lunar month. In Treta Jug, the fast of *chaudash* (or *chodas*) was performed on Tuesday, the 14th of the month; while in the third Duapur Jug, the fast of *ama's* (or *amavasia*) was kept on Wednesday, the 15th of the month. They were not sure about the time of the fasting in Kal Jug. Some people kept rigid and torturing fasting, presuming that the fasting in Kal Jug must fall subsequently on Thursday, the 16th of the lunar month, and concentrated in reading, meditation, prayer and abstained from food both day and night. Sometimes, they stood on single leg, or on their heads inside the water, without food in severe cold or in the scorching sun with their eyes shut tongues stitched. The new convents brought their old customs in Ismaili fold, but Pir Shams abolished them and exhorted to keep a fasting on the crescent falling on Friday, known as *beej* means *crescent*. In the fasting of *beej*, two Islamic aspects (Friday and New Moon) were significantly included to distinguish it from the old customs of the new converts.

The Prophet also kept such type of fasting in the last days of the month of Sha'ban (**Bukhari**, 30:62, **Abu Daud**, 14:56) or the *ayyam al-bidz* that is the 13th, 14th and 15th of the lunar month (**Bukhari**, 30:60, **Masnad**, 4:165) or Monday and Thursday (**Abu Daud**, 14:59) or the Arfat Day, that is the one day before the Eid al-Azha (**Tirmizi**, 6:45) or the 1st day of Shawal (**Abu Daud**, 14:57) or Muharram (**Abu Daud**, 14:55), or the *tashriq* days, that is 11th, 12th and 13th of Zil Haja (**Bukhari**, 30:68) or the Ashura, that is 10th Muharram (**Bukhari**, 30:59). Abdullah bin Masud relates that the Prophet used to fast on the first three days of every month, particularly on Fridays (**Tirmizi**, 4:258).

The Prophet said, "The best of fasts is that of my brother David" (*khayr al-siyam sawm akhi Dawud*). When asked, "O'Apostle of God, what kind of fast is that?" He replied, "David used to keep his fast one day and break it on the next day" (Ibid. p. 52). The Prophet fasted alike, but forbade his followers, saying, "I am not as one of you. I pass the night with my Lord, Who gives me food and drink." It is related that Sahl bin Abdullah

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SHUKARWARI BEEJ

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Tustari (d. 283/896) used to eat only once in fifteen days. Abdullah Khafif kept forty interrupted fasts for forty days. The fast of forty days of the Sufis is derived from the fast of Moses (Koran, 7:138). Almost of the similar nature, the fasting of *beej* was prescribed for 36 hours. Imam Aga Ali Shah visited Kutchh, India in 1878 during the terrible famine, where he shortened its duration to 12 hours from dawn to dusk.

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The new moon is a symbol of peace. The word *hilal* means *slim crescent*, while the word *badr* means *full moon*. The word appears only once in its plural form, *ahilla* in the Koran (2:189). The general term in the Koran for moon however occurs 27 times, usually paired with the sun. The Hebrew word *hodesh* also means *new moon*. The term *lail at-qamar* means *the night of the crescent*. The method of calculation of the new moon was firstly introduced by the Fatimids in 331/942 in North Africa, then in 359/970 at Cairo. That is the reason that the use of the *hilal* as a decorative emblem was introduced firstly in the period of Imam az-Zahir (d. 427/1036). On the early night when the crescent appeared, the Ismailis call it *chand ra't* (crescent night). According to modern computation, it takes 29.530589 days from one to another new moon.

On the other hand, different terms for Friday have been used in the Hadith, such as *yaum al-mawlid* (the day of the birth of the Prophet), *yaum al-fazl* (day of gracing), *yaum al-baraka* (day of benediction), *yaum al-rahma* (day of mercy), *yaum al-ijabut* (the day of the acceptance of prayer), *yaum al-eid* (the day of festival), *yaum al ithq* (the day of piety), *yaum al-ghuzwa* (the day of struggle), *yaum al-karamat* (the day of honour), *yaum al-mazid* (the day of abundance) or *eid al-mu'amin* (festival of the believers). Abu Huraira reports that the Prophet said, "The most important day that dawned is the Friday. It was on this day that Adam was created and on this day he was admitted to paradise." The Prophet also said, "There is a certain blessed moment in the course of a Friday that when any prayer is offered, it is accepted." (**Bukhari**). It must be known that the Islamic calander also began on Friday, the 16th July, 622. The 54th Koranic chapter is al-Qamar (moon) with 55 verses revealed in Mecca, and the 62nd chapter is al-Juma having 11 verses, revealed in Medina.

The moon is a symbol of peace and the Friday as grace. When *peace* and *grace* join together (Crescent and Friday), the day becomes very sacramental and full of significance, and on that day the Ismailis keep fasting, known as *beej*. This is a fast for purification of heart, for peace of mind, for spiritual happiness and Divine grace.

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